

Commentary

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A moment's lapse turns world's violence real

ATHENS — It's always a mistake to scream at a stranger. The message is rarely received. I've made the mistake myself often enough, and the other night watched as my friend Angelos did so. A careless cell-phone chatterer nearly drove his car into ours, and Angelos did the human thing. "Watch it!" he yelled. "Get off the phone and drive!" Or so I imagine he yelled. Since the exhortation was delivered in Greek, imagine is all I can do.

But the rest I did not imagine: The 20-something driver yelled back, blasted from his car, tore open our driver's door and seized Angelos by the shirt. The little girls screamed from the back seat as the men struggled. The rest of us called out helplessly: *Parakalo!* Please! There are children here! Children!



Kate Stanley

As if it mattered to the road-rager. But Athens traffic — perhaps the world's worst — won't stand for such holdups, so a few well-muscled men peeled the young thumper from Angelos and propelled him backward. We took a hurtling left as the grown-ups exhaled and the kids burst into tears.

So it goes in the streets of

Athens, in the streets and sidewalks and kitchens of every city of the world. Fury builds and then blows, and a shirt is torn or an eye blackened or a head blown off or a neighborhood destroyed.

Back at the hotel, a muted television recounted the day's news from Israel: Another suicide bombing, another round of strikes against arch-enemy Arafat. The girl-almost-10 saw nothing of the news, seized as she was by her own story. She quivered and clutched, asking time and again if "the horrible guy" would come to hurt her.

"Of course he won't," I said. "The horrible guy doesn't even know your name."

A moment's silence, and then an observation: "But he knows some little girl's name," said the girl-almost-10.

As deputy undersecretary for watchfulness of The Sacred Fellowship of Little Girls (Northern Hemisphere Chapter), this girl knows a scoundrel when she sees one. Her thoughts echoed Angelos' words as we left our little scuffle behind: "I cannot stop thinking," he said, "that the boy is someone's son. That he could have been mine."

I argued with Angelos: No son of his, I said, would attack a stranger. But all parents hope that. And in any case, I couldn't honestly tell the girl-almost-10 that all little girls are safe — not with the news from the Middle East droning across the room.

But neither could I easily tell her the truth: that there is no place on Earth without its share of Bad Men Ready to Rip Shirts — and bad women, too.

Some do more than rip

shirts. Some blow a gasket and leap from their cars with guns. Some calmly blow themselves up to prove a point. Some blow up villages in vengeance. All feel fully justified, ready to answer the latest insult with fresh injury. All are ready to tell us the difference between the unmannerly lout and the terrorist — a breed of cat altogether distinct from the freedom-fighter, an appellation they reserve for themselves — and to explain why *their* blowups are the best of the lot.

It's as common a thing as the world knows. The slings and arrows of cruelty fly everywhere these days — threatening to tear not just a few shirt-fronts, but the fabric that binds the world's people together.

I know this. Yet somehow it took a minor moment of road

rage to drive this sickening fact home. Usually, I can watch the 10-year-olds of Palestine flee from shack-flattening tanks and merely shake my head. Most days, I can hear of thousands dying daily of AIDS in Africa and set out as planned for a cappuccino. Then something far less shattering disrupts my evening, and I am undone for more than a day.

How readily we shrug off the loss of lives of strangers, yet take to heart the slightest assaults on our own entitlements.

At least the girl-almost-10 knows to worry for her unmet friend, the one whose name is known by the Bad Man Who Rips Shirts.

— *Kate Stanley is a Star Tribune editorial writer. She is at kstanley@startribune.com.*